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NEWS HEADLINES

A first: US envoy visits MILF camp

By Edwin Fernandez

(Source: Philippine Daily Inquirer News Online – 2/20/08)

CAMP DARAPANAN, Shariff Kabunsuan -- It wasn't exactly a social call in the lion's den, but US Ambassador Kristie Kenney obviously disarmed her hosts.

Kenney stepped into this stronghold of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front accompanied by MILF fighters on horseback. At the main sentry post, she waved and smiled at elite security forces, unmindful of a huge 50-cal. machine gun.

Heavily armed men, some in tiger military uniforms and brandishing assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades, greeted the American ambassador, who wore a pink shawl, white long-sleeved blouse and green slacks.

Kenney was ushered into the main headquarters. There, she met privately with MILF chief Murad Ebrahim and his central committee.

Emerging an hour and a half later, Kenney said: "I cannot comment. I cannot say anything about this visit. This is my private visit."

Although Washington had sent representatives to the MILF in the past, Kenney was the first US ambassador to meet with top rebel officials.

MILF officials said the discussions centered on the peace talks with the Philippine government.

"There was high hope on the part of the US envoy that the talks will succeed," Murad said.

Murad declined to give details of the meeting or whether the Balikatan exercises, which will be conducted in some MILF-influenced areas until March 13, were discussed.

Peace talks were suspended after the MILF backed out last November over Manila's insistence on the use of the Philippine Constitution as the basis of discussions concerning the future Moro territory.

US support

An MILF official, who requested anonymity for lack of authority to talk to the media, said Kenney reiterated Washington's support of the peace process.

"That's the reason why I personally came over," he quoted Kenney as telling the MILF leadership.

He said Kenney also pledged more development aid for war-torn areas.

"She said peace in Mindanao is for the benefit of everybody, not only the Bangsamoro people but the international community as well," the official said.

The United States has underscored the importance of the Philippines in the global war against terrorism.

Kenney was accompanied by Deputy Ambassador Paul Jones and four officials of the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

"We welcome her efforts to reach us in the name of peace," Murad said.

Good gesture

Murad said Kenney's visit was a "good gesture and would surely help improve the stalled talks."

Washington has pledged tens of millions of dollars in aid to the troubled Mindanao region once Manila strikes a peace treaty with the 12,000-member MILF.

Concerned with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Southeast Asia and the previous use of MILF training camps by Jemaah Islamiyah militants, the US government is also providing military training and intelligence to Filipino forces in Mindanao.

"We are on track. We are negotiating now so we can achieve the aspirations of the (Filipino Muslims). We are trying very hard to get the peace agreement that we want," Murad said.

Representatives of the MILF and the government met earlier this year to discuss the resumption of the talks, which are hosted by Malaysia, he said.

“We are just discussing some issues now and we are returning to the peace table in March,” he added.

“We have to build peace on the ground first while negotiating,” Murad said, adding that USAID “is helping us in building this aspect of the peace process.”

Joint exercises

MILF officials said that Kenney asked the MILF to support the annual joint military exercises between US and Filipino troops. This year’s maneuvers began in several areas of Mindanao on Monday.

Michael Mastura, a member of the MILF peace panel, said the peace talks with the Philippine government were back on schedule but said there were some “obstacles relating to the ancestral domain issue.”

“We would have to see whether we can reach a political settlement on the ancestral domain issue,” Mastura added.

The MILF has been waging a bloody rebellion in Mindanao since 1978, but signed a truce with Manila in 2003, paving the way for peace talks.

Several thousand US troops began arriving in Mindanao on Monday to take part in the annual military exercises with the Philippines. With a report from Agence France-Presse